

The Position
of the
Society of Friends
with
Regard to War

The Religious Society of Friends, from its origin in the Seventeenth Century to the present time, has continuously held that war and Christianity are incompatible; and therefore as Christians, they cannot, under any circumstances, support or prepare for war.

Herein are some statements from early leaders of the Society of Friends, as well as representative official expressions of the past and present position of this religious society.

1952

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1650

"I told them I knew from whence all wars arose ... and that I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars, that I was come into the covenant of Peace which was before all war and strife."

GEORGE FOX (to the Commonwealth Commissioners) Journal, Vol. 1, p. 69, bi-Cent. edit.

1660

"We utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatever; this is our testimony to the whole world. The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move us unto it; and we certainly know, and testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us unto all truth, will never move us to fight and war against my man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world . . . Therefore we cannot learn war any more."

GEORGE FOX AND OTHERS. A Declaration from the Harmless and Innocent People of God, called Quakers, presented to Charles II.

1763

"Oh that we who declare against wars and acknowledge our trust to be In God only, may walk in the light, and therein examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates! May we look upon our treasures. the furniture of our houses, and our treasure and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions.

JOHN WOOLMAN, A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich.

1804

"We feel bound explicitly to avow our continued unshaken persuasion that all war is utterly incompatible with the plain precepts of our Divine Lord and Lawgiver, and with the whole spirit and tenor of His Gospel; and that no plea of necessity or of policy, however urgent or peculiar, can avail to release either individuals or nations from the paramount allegiance which they owe unto Him who hath Said, 'Love your enemies.' "

LONDON YEARLY MEETING EPISTLE

1823

"War must be wholly forbidden, or allowed without restriction to defense; for no definitions of lawful and unlawful war will be, or can be, attended to. If the principles of Christianity, in any case or for any purpose, allow armies to meet and slaughter one another, her principles will never conduct us to the period which Prophecy has assured us they shall produce. There is no hope of an eradication of War, but by an absolute and total abandonment of it. Either we must refuse to fight or we abandon Christianity. War and Christianity are contradictory ways of life."

JONATHAN DYMOND, The Essay on War.

1885

"As Christians we cannot recognize two doctrines, one for individuals, as between themselves, and another for nations. The morality which Christianity claims from men in their intercourse with one another is surely no less binding on them when they are called to act in the name and on behalf of their country. Personal combat, as a means of settling disputes between individuals, has long been abolished in this country as barbarous and criminal. War is substantially international duelling."

LONDON YEARLY MEETING EPISTLE

1900

"Our position with respect to Peace cannot be isolated without loss from the rest of our faith. ...Our witness is not narrow and negative but far-reaching in its scope and intensely positive in the active service for Christ's peaceable Kingdom to which it calls us."

LONDON YEARLY MEETING Pamphlet, Christianity and War.

1915

"Christ demands of us that we adhere, without swerving, to the methods of love, and therefore if a seeming conflict should arise between the claims of His service and those of the State, it is to Christ that our supreme loyalty must be given, whatever the consequence. We would, however, remember that whatever is our loyalty to God and humanity is at the same time the highest loyalty that we can render to our nation."

LONDON YEARLY MEETING - From a statement presented by a Committee appointed by the young men of enlistment age present at Yearly Meeting.

1920

"The fundamental ground of our opposition to war is religious and ethical. It attaches to the nature of God as revealed in Christ and to the nature of man as related to Him. There are economic and biological arguments, but they are subsidiary to the main position. The only absolute ground for an unalterable and inevitable opposition to war is one which springs out of the consciousness of obligation to what the enlightened soul knows ought to be. That Christianity, which makes war impossible, is a way of life which extirpates or controls the dispositions that lead to war. It eradicates the seeds of war in one's daily life. It translates the beatitudes out of the language of a printed book into the practice and spirit of a living person. The Christian way of life as revealed in the New Testament, the voice of conscience revealed in the soul, the preciousness of personality revealed by the transforming force of love, and the irrationality revealed in modern warfare, either together or singly, present grounds which, for those who feel them, make participation in war under any conditions impossible."

From a statement adopted by the CONFERENCE of ALL FRIENDS held in London.

1922

"In the aftermath of history's most terrible war, we see two paths before us. One leads inevitably to another war by renewed preparedness; the other begins with a complete rejection of war, and of all preparations for it, for any purpose and against any people; it demands definite organization for peace."

YEARLY MEETINGS of PHILADELPHIA,
An Appeal to the Churches of Christ of all countries.

1926

"The witness of the Society of Friends for peace is far-reaching in scope and positive in nature. It depends upon our conception of God and of God's relation to man. Christ taught the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man; war is the open denial of this Fatherhood and brotherhood. The followers of Christ cannot take part in destroying the bodies of man in whom God has implanted His nature and who are potentially the temples of the Holy Spirit."

Book of FAITH AND PRACTICE
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Arch Street).

"From its earliest days the Religious Society of Friends has held that war is contrary to the spirit, the life, and the teaching of Jesus, who renounced the weapons of worldly passion and used methods of love and self-sacrifice in their place. We restate our conviction that no plea of necessity or policy, however urgent, can release either individuals or nations from their duty to follow the law of love. It is a serious and solemn thing to stand as the advocate of an inviolable peace. To carry out such a profession consistently will, at times, require the highest resolution, perseverance and courage. Such should, however, be the devoted effort of every Friend."

BOOK OF DISCIPLINE
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Race Street).

[date uncertain]

"As members of a historic peace church we love our country and sincerely work for its highest welfare. True love for our country does not mean a hatred of others. It is our conviction that only the application of the principles of peace, love, justice, liberty, and international goodwill will make for the highest welfare of our country; and the highest welfare of our country must harmonize with the highest welfare of humanity everywhere. Our faith is in security through love, protection through goodwill; and for such we are willing to make the necessary sacrifice. We are opposed to war as a method of settling disputes because it is unchristian, destructive of our highest values and sows the seed of future wars. We feel that we are true patriots because we build upon the eternal principles of right which are the only foundation of stable government in our world community."

Ohio Yearly Meeting of the Friends Church (Damascus) [Evangelical].

1937

"For almost three hundred years the Society of Friends has labored to do away with war by first doing away with the causes and occasions for it. It has endeavored in its own circle to remove the roots and seeds of war by forming an atmosphere of life that makes war unthinkable. . . .

"Insofar as they are true to their principles, Friends will make heavy sacrifices to transmit their spirit of love and faith, but they cannot, as followers of Christ, endorse war methods or support them, or be themselves a voluntary part of a system engaged in making war."

A letter presented to President Roosevelt, by a delegation of American Friends.

[date uncertain]

The Life and power of early Quakers centered in a firsthand fellowship with the Spirit of God as revealed through Jesus Christ. Friends spoke of this Presence as the Light of Christ within. It was this Light which brought forth new religious understanding and new and higher knowledge of moral values. It was this Light which brought George Fox to his positive renunciation of war.

This was an important day in the life of the Society of Friends; for until such a decision was firmly and irrevocably made, there could always be the temptation, in days of fear or threat or catastrophe, to fall back upon war as a temporary expedient. But once having turned their backs upon violence as a method, Friends have gone on to creative action—to venture their lives for love and truth and righteousness and justice. They have had to challenge old customs, fixed habits, and the way of compromise with war. They have become positive peace makers. In this they give their lives to the building of the Kingdom of God.

HAROLD CHANCE

1940

"We are thankful for the witness borne quietly and courageously by a new generation of young men before the tribunals and among their fellows. We acknowledge the general recognition by government and people of conscientious refusal to take any part in war; but out of deep religious conviction we maintain our opposition to military conscription, and if governments press upon us totalitarian claims which clash with the claims of conscience. older Friends. as well as vounger.

will be ready to testify that we live under a higher compulsion than that of the state. Our first allegiance is due to Jesus Christ. We are bound to refuse, at no matter what cost, all that conflicts with our loyalty to him."

An Epistle from LONDON YEARLY MEETING

1948

"I am not primarily concerned with the question whether war pays economically, or does not pay; whether it brings desired results or does not bring them, though that question is not in doubt. From my point of view war is absolutely and eternally morally wrong, and utterly and flatly incompatible with the way of life Christ has revealed and Christianity has established."

RUFUS M. JONES

The Church, The Gospel and War.

1950

"Though we meet under the shadow of loyalty oaths, restriction of liberties, conscription, and a governmental policy relying on armed force, we are neither intimidated nor fearful. Out of similar conflicts grew Friends' original testimonies, and in the face of these conflicts one of the most searching tests of Friends' principles and way of life today—not only in the eyes of men but in God's sight—will be the extent of our enlightened and dedicated implementation of the peace testimony. Both the inescapable involvement of Friends in a war-making and war-breeding culture and the sense Friends have of responsibility to society lead us to affirm that more is required than refusal to bear arms, more is demanded than opposition to war. Conscientious Objection to evil must be complemented by conscientious PRO-jection of God's spirit into affirmative peace action."

From a Statement referred to the Society of Friends by a called
Conference of American Friends, Richmond, Indiana.

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